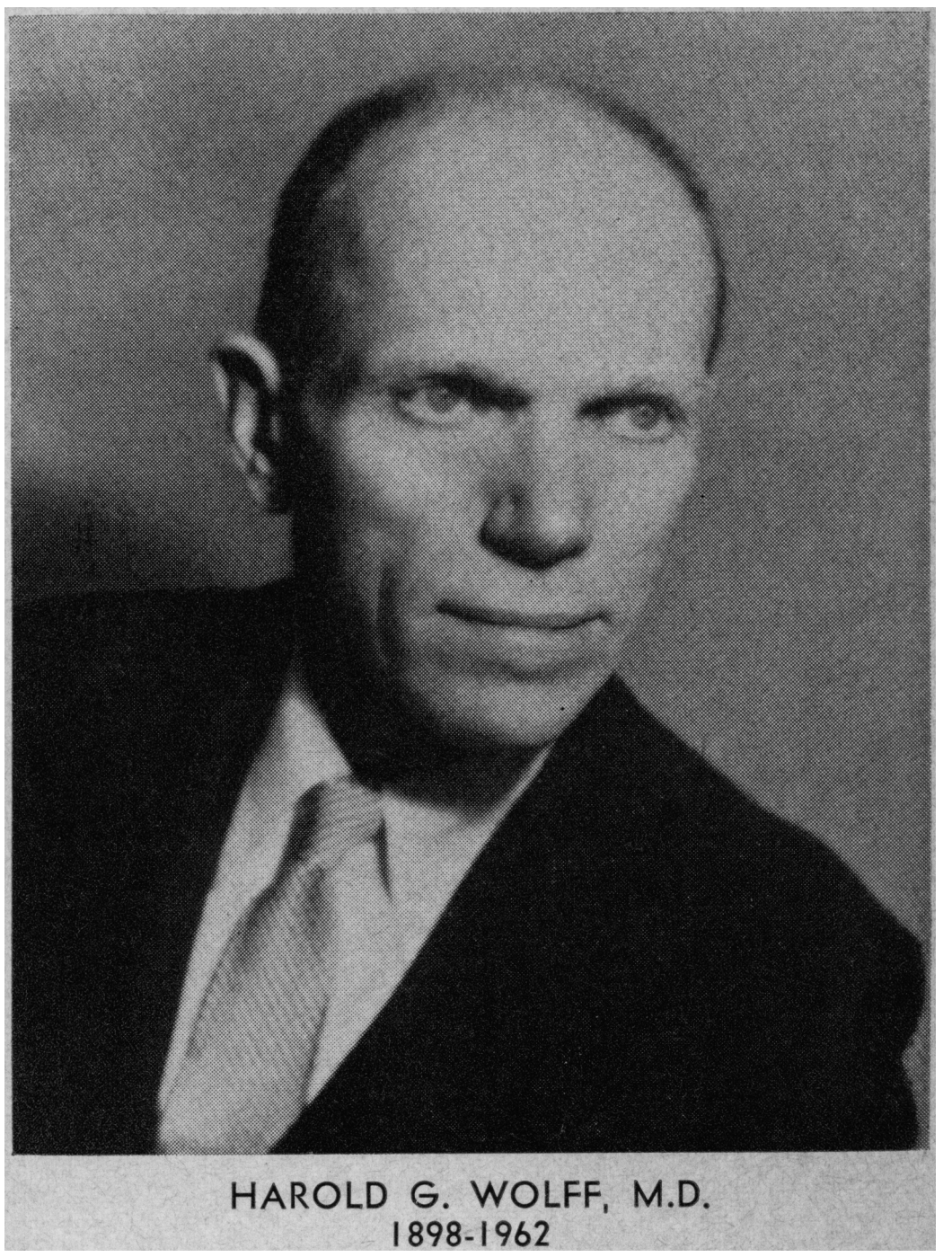
Harold G. Wolff, M.D.

1898-1962

Dr. Harold G. Wolff, Anne Parrish Titzel Professor of Medicine (Neurology) at Cornell University Medical College, and Director of the Neurological Service of the New York Hospital, died February 21, 1962, at the age of 63. In the pattern of many famous physicians, he was a victim of a malady foremost in the cause of death in his specialty, bilateral cerebral vascular thrombosis, associated with a carotid artery syndrome. Harold had suffered from migraine for many years, and any premonitory symptoms of his terminal disease could well have been attributed to a recurrence of his migraine. The final insult was catastrophic, and a few hours later he lapsed into deep coma and died without regaining consciousness. Postmortem examination revealed that the vascular changes were confined largely to the head and neck.



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Dr. Wolff was a recognized international authority on headache, cerebral circulation, and the impact of life's stressful situations on behavior and their relation to the pathogenesis of organic disease. He was an inveterate investigator, but was never one to hurry into print. Nevertheless, he was a senior author or co-author of several hundred scientific manuscripts, and a dozen monographs in neurology and neurologic disorders.

Harold was born in New York City, the only son of Louis and Emma Wolff. He graduated from the College of the City of New York in 1918 and Harvard Medical School in 1923. Following graduation from medical school, he returned to Manhattan and the Departments of Neurology of Cornell Clinic and Bellevue Hospital. Between 1926 and 1928, he was a research fellow with Stanley Cobb at Harvard Medical School and the Neurological Service at the Boston City Hospital. During this period, it was my privilege as a medical student to assist Harold in a portion of his studies on cerebral circulation. I did not believe that the dichotomy of organic versus functional disease was resolved in Harold's mind at that time. He maintained that the principal value of neurologic training was to distinguish organic from functional disease. This irresolution of the significance of demonstrable structural change and devastating, but ill-defined, functional disease was subjected to intense scrutiny during his next two years at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in the department of psychiatry. After a year of study in Europe, he was prepared to accept an appointment at the newly built New York Hospital, Cornell Medical Center. It was here that he remained for the duration of his career.

The participation of the nervous system, organic and functional, in man's reaction to

environment was examined with a remarkable diligence by Harold and his coterie of investigators. Life stress inciting bodily disease is his best-known concept. The impact of stress, according to Harold, was manifested by such common maladies as peptic ulcer, hypertension, colitis, and migraine. Pain was another phenomenon that benefited from his fertile mind. When he was studying cerebral circulation with Stanley Cobb, he developed a theory that alteration in the function of cerebral vessels, the primary source of pain, was the result of disturbances in their regulation, and that disturbances originated in the higher centers as a reaction of the headache sufferer to his inability to control life's stresses.

Although a reticent and, in many ways, a lonely investigator, he was never alone in the laboratory or in the clinic. He attracted an endless number of young associates and fellows who were usually addressed as "Doctor," irrespective of the age difference between teacher and pupil. Stewart G. Wolf, Jr., Edward Kunkle, Fred Plum, George A. Schumacher, Ian Stevenson, David T. Graham, Fletcher H. McDowell, Basil S. Hetzel, and Lawrence E. Hinkle, Jr. are but a few of his best-known pupils. Wolff and Wolf (Stewart) collaborated on a classic study of a modern Alexis St. Martin, whose stomach wall had been exposed following an accident in childhood. The secretions of the stomach, the reactions of the mucosa, and other physiological alterations were studied during the moods and activities of the experimental subject in his daily routine. Out of these investigations was developed the concept of the "adaptive reaction pattern," purporting to show that man's reactions to his environment influence the course of "organic" disease. Wolff concluded that "psychosomatic disease" is not a special category, but that all diseases may be influenced by adaptive reaction patterns initiated in the higher centers of the brain.

At the time of his death, Dr. Wolff was Editor-in-Chief of the *Archives of Neurology,* Editor for the section on "Diseases of the Nervous System" in Cecil and Loeb's *Textbook of Medicine,* and Consultant in Research and Development to the Department of Defense, Chairman of the Veterans Administration Division of Medical Sciences, National Research Committee, and President of the Human Ecology Fund.

He was an emeritus member of the American Society for Clinical Investigation, the American Physiological Society, the American College of Physicians, the American Neurological Association, and the Association of American Physicians. As a member of the latter organization, he was a perpetual attendant at the meetings in Atlantic City each spring. Many of the younger physicians in the audience did not appreciate that the tall gaunt figure, who would wander down the aisle and occupy a seat in the front row, was seeking a vantage point to absorb what was new as well as to be ready to criticize or to query without bias.

Harold is survived by his widow, the well-known American painter, Isabel Bishop, and by a son, Remsen N. Wolff. He was a scholar, an avid reader of medical and general literature—a true Manhattanite. As a tutee, I respected Harold throughout his professional career, but I really never felt that I knew him, even though it was my earnest desire to express respect and warmth for one who conveyed to his associates his great concern over the conflict of soma and psyche in the pathogenesis of disease.

JOHN H. TALBOTT, M.D.